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Philip Slate

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The Lord's Supper and the Lord's Day

by Philip Slate

Two modern concerns raise afresh the question about the appropriate day of corporate worship for Christians. First, as the gospel spreads worldwide should Christians assemble on a locally established religious day, or is there a distinctive day for Christians to worship corporately? For example, should Christians in Nazareth, Israel, assemble on Saturday (in a Jewish State) or Friday (in deference to the large Arab, hence Muslim, population in Nazareth) or Sunday (for some biblical reason)? This is a live missiological question.

Second, as secularism gradually dominates formerly Christian territory and people are required to work on Sunday as often as Thursday (as in parts of Western Europe), is there a principle involved in insisting on Sunday as a day of worship? Will one day in seven suffice? If so, should the day of worship also be a day of rest?

This second reason goaded W. Rordorf to do his work, *Sunday*.¹ Since then many articles and books have appeared on various aspects of the subject. They all have equal access to the data, but they arrive at different positions: continued seventh-day Sabbath,² one day in seven for rest, Sunday as a Sabbath, etc.³ These varying positions arise chiefly from the prior hermeneutical conclusions the authors have reached about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath, the normative character of early church practice, and the validity of the post-apostolic materials.

Narrowing the Scope

For functional purposes, it is assumed here that neither Saturday nor Sunday, the seventh nor the first day of the week is to be kept by Christians as a Sabbath (no-work; rest) day. The recent studies by both Rordorf and Carson seem compelling on these points.⁴ But if the first day is the day on which all Christians should assemble, what is its significance?

The resurrection of Jesus occurred on the first day of the week. All four Gospels testify that Jesus was raised from the dead on that day. It was "when the Sabbath was past . . . very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb . . ." (Mark 16:1-2; see Luke 24:1, 13, 33-35; John 20:1; and Matt 28:1). At the center of the early Christian proclamation was the affirmation that Jesus was raised "on the third day," which was the first day of the week (1 Cor 15:3-5). Jesus was "designated Son of God in power . . . by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:3), an act through which also Christians were/are "born anew to a living hope" (1 Pet 1:3). This act of central significance to the Christian took place on the first day of the week.

Jesus chose to make many of his post-resurrection appearances on the first day of the week. On the evening of that resurrection day, "the first day of the week," Jesus "came and stood among them" (John 20:19). When he manifested himself to Thomas it was "eight days later" (v 26); and at least one meal with the disciples was on "that day" (Luke 24:28-43 with verses 1 and 13), the day on which he appeared to the two on the Emmaus road.

The decisive coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, and the consequent beginning of the messianic people of God, the church, took place on the first day of the week (cf. Lev 23:15-16). It is difficult to see all of these as mere coincidences, especially against the background of a paucity of such emphasis in the Old Testament. Why were not other days used as incidental markers of time?

How did the early church understand this? As with other questions we may ask of Scripture, we would like more information than we have here. But there are three New Testament texts of importance. In Troas Paul and his companions, on their way back to Jerusalem, stayed for seven days (Acts 20:6). It would appear that an incidental evening meeting could have been arranged at any point, but the text states that on the "first day of the week" they "gathered together to break bread" (v 7), even though no particular meaning is attached to that day itself. This text alone furnishes limited information, but, it forms part of the cumulative evidence one must consider.

Paul directed the churches of Corinth and Galatia to "put something aside and store it up" "on the first day of every week" (1 Cor 16:1-2). If that collection is interpreted as a mere home duty at the end of a work week, then it would appear Paul would have failed to achieve what he had in mind, viz., avoid a collection when he came through (v 2). Nor is it evident that either Saturday or Sunday were pay-days as we think of them. Why not just specify "every week" or "regularly" if nothing in particular was occurring on the first day? When one considers the options it is difficult to escape the conclusion that something was going on "every first day of the week," although here no meaning is given to that day, especially since it was not Paul's didactic purpose to do so.

The significance of the third text likely has been overlooked, even by the Protestant Reformers. John declared he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's day" (Rev 1:10) and saw the strikingly dressed personage standing among the lampstands who claimed to be "the first and the last, and the living one" who died and is now "alive for evermore" with the keys of Death and Hades (vss 17-18). Although the Lord made every day, why would a particular day be designated as the "Lord's day?" John gives no explanation of the day in the text; he merely refers to it as though his readers would know what he meant. If we are permitted to determine the meaning of "Lord's day" as we determine the meanings of other New Testament words which are used infrequently, then the meaning is clear. As Deissmann's work illuminates various New Testament word meanings, so the

post-apostolic materials are decisive about the meaning of "Lord's day."

Several collections of early second century materials are available,⁵ and no one can seriously question that the earliest post-apostolic Christians used the expression "Lord's day" to mean the first day of the week.⁶ Thus in Revelation, he who is Lord among competing lords (Rev 17:14; 19:16, etc.), the one who conquers for the faithful (Rev 17:14), has a day exclusively related to him, and that is the first day of the week. The earliest associations between Jesus and the first day were in connection with his resurrection and post-resurrection appearances; and it seems more than coincidental that he should refer to himself in this context as the living one, who died and is alive for evermore (Rev 1:18).

Separately, these three texts seem indecisive; collectively, and especially with the second century witness to the meaning of the "Lord's day," they make it clear that special significance was attached to the first day because it was the day of the resurrection of Jesus, a pivotal event for Christian faith (1 Cor 15:12-19). As such, it was the day of regular assembly for the whole church, regardless of how many smaller or incidental (cf. Acts 12:5, 12; 20:17, 36-38) meetings they may have enjoyed. Some regular assembly time was stipulated (cf. Heb 10:25), and the only cumulative evidence we have for a specific day is that it was the first day of the week, the resurrection day. As Ferguson states, "It so happens that on the question of the day of Christian assembly the witnesses from the early church are numerous, unanimous, and unambiguous."⁷ Nor is there anything strange in assigning a new day for worship to mark the unique, salvation-history events of Jesus' death and resurrection, events that inaugurated the messianic era, just as food elements from the Pass-over were given new significance in the Lord's Supper.

The Lord's Supper

The New Testament is clear that the "Lord's supper" (1 Cor 11:20) is a corporate activity; it is not a sacrament administered individually regardless of context. In 1 Corinthians chapters 10 and 11 it is obvious that the supper had a communal function. When many partake of the "one bread" they are to affirm their participation in one body (10:17). The activity was to take place "when you come together" (11:17) or "assemble as a church" (11:20).

At every point of meaning for the supper the focus is on Jesus in his redemptive capacity: giving thanks (v 24), remembrance (vv 24-25), covenant blood (v 25), and proclamation of his death until he comes (v 26). Again, the witness of the early second

century is that such activities were regularly carried out on the Lord's day. The meanings attached to the Lord's day are virtually identical with the meanings found in the Lord's Supper. They belong together.

Oddly enough, in the Carson studies the Lord's Supper in connection with the Lord's day is scarcely mentioned, and that may arise from the more limited nature of their inquiry. On the other hand, Rordorf sees a strong connection between the Lord's day and the Lord's Supper. One statement in his conclusion is: "No Lord's supper without Sunday, and no Sunday without the Lord's supper." He makes out a fairly compelling case for his view, and it is consistent with the above biblical and post-apostolic understanding. Having the Lord's Supper on another day weakens its doctrinal significance as a corporate act connected with first-day events.

In one sense, everything a "holy" people, priesthood and nation (1 Pet 1:15-16; 2:5-9) possess and relate to are sanctified for God's purposes, including things, space and time. The Old Testament seventh day was no more inherently holy than the third day. God gave all days. But the seventh day was so to mark an event that, ideally, a pious Jew

would be more covenantally faithful on every other day. So with the Lord's day. One who regularly and appropriately marks the resurrection day should have a more vigorous and consistent resurrection faith (1 Pet 1:3) on every other day. The Lord's day-Lord's Supper connection are designed to have such a focus that all of life will be pivoted on the salvation-history events. If this analysis is correct, then it suggests that more needs to be said in sermons and at "the table of the Lord" about the relationship between Lord's day events, Lord's table, and the Lord of life.

In pagan and other non-Christian communities it would seem important to retain first-day meetings and Lord's Supper, even if that is done early in the morning or later in the evening. It is the regular reminder of the redemptive acts of Jesus and the eschatological dimension of the Christian's hope. One is neither Judaistic nor legalistic in such emphases.

Philip Slate is Chairperson of the Missions Department, Abilene Christian University, Abilene Texas.